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# The Workshop

Monthly Journal, devoted to Progress of the Useful Arts.

EDITED BY  
I. SCHNORR AND OTHERS.

VOL. VIII.

No. 9.

## ON MEDIAEVAL AND RENAISSANCE WOODWORK, WITH ESPECIAL REFERENCE TO ANCIENT SEATING.

By

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Among the objects which offer a wide field for the development of surface decoration are cabinets, cupboards or presses, pieces of furniture which Gothic architecture has more or less neglected, principally because they were not usually considered as show pieces, but for the most part were put in the least important places in the churches, as the vestries &c., and were seen by but few eyes. Very simple in design, their chief decoration consists, for the greater part, in rich superadditions with here and there some surface ornamentation or tracery, and a cornice usually ornamented with battlements. Nowhere do we see any attempt to enliven these heavy masses, to break the surfaces by any structural ornaments corresponding to the objects themselves, or to give any organic animation to the whole. The Renaissance, on the other hand took up these pieces of furniture all the more zealously and produced many extraordinary and variously conceived works of this kind, making use very successfully of the antique stele or acroterial termination in addition to the pillars, pilasters and cornices of the same period. The monotony and heaviness of the mass was then generally relieved by the lower half being enlivened by columns and shafts, or after the antique by supports in the shape of animals' feet. (Figs. 51 and 52 from the Austrian Museum in Vienna). Frequently also the very reverse is seen, the lower half being massive, in form of a pedestal and the upper half showing a similar arrangement to that described above. (Fig. 53.) In the former style are the so called cabinets. The upper part of the press is either terminated by a hori-

zontal cornice, or by a pediment frequently crowned with freely treated, and not always organically developed ornaments. Those, which are built up in this manner are, as a rule, enlivened with very rich ornamentation: horizontal friezes and mouldings running from end to end alternate with, or are traversed by perpendicular devices: the most projecting parts show rosettes, masks of animals or half-length figures; the columns and pillars are often treated quite freely, or if they correspond to stone pillars in their structure they are most usually fluted in their upper part, the lower and smaller portion on the contrary being most diversely adorned and provided with a peculiar belt-like scroll work. These interlacements which are very frequent in panellings, the belt-work with rolled and open ends, together with the shell motive, the cartouch and flutings, are typical characteristics of the later Renaissance, and belong to the innumerable, arbitrary and unorganic additions which were more and more adopted in the furniture of the seventeenth century.

In comparison with the rich finish of the cabinets in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, the transformation of the tables in the Renaissance period seems of less importance, particularly as in the middle ages very correct principles were followed in this department. In the Gothic style, the tables are either constructed with solid side pieces to support the massive oak slab, or with four isolated feet. The oak side pieces which are frequently three inches thick are usually scalloped and covered with rich ornamental carvings. For the greater solidity of the table both side pieces are united either in the middle, or at

the bottom of the feet by wooden ties and small wedges (Fig. 55, table from the Kaisersheim Monastery at Donauwörth). The borders also immediately below the slab often show rich carvings (in the foregoing example, and Figs. 55a and 55b inlaid ornaments also enter into the projecting part of the slab). A similar treatment is shown in Fig. 56, a table from Husth in Hungary. But together with this style of treatment we often find four isolated supports or feet. The fundamental idea of both these forms of tables was again taken up by the Renaissance and transformed into the spirit of more modern times, recurring here, as in other analogous cases, to the principles of the antique, and substituting in place of the simply constructive forms of the Gothic side pieces, which indeed were often heavy and too suggestive of mere carpentry, symbols intended to characterise supports such as animals' feet, dolphins, sphynxes &c. Among tables of this kind are found works of very different value: on the more ancient ones which, in general, approach near the antique treatment, we see forms suggestive of the construction, the decoration moderate, every ornament is in its proper place, its design noble and of excellent style; in the later examples, these evident relationships between construction and form are neglected and so they often err by an extravagance and pretentiousness of form which in the Rococo period ended in the most capricious and extraordinary creations. The examples of Renaissance tables in plate 8 (a dinner table with leaves from St. John's hospital at Bruges of the year 1624, and a table from the cathedral of the same city), in which we meet with two quite different styles of supporting sidepieces, do not indeed belong to the best period of the Renaissance, but still show many interesting motives; in the first example, if we except the peculiar vase-like middle part, there prevail the proper structural lines of the object, and with reason, for in a table, less than in any other piece of furniture, is there any necessity for that curving and rounding off the lines of the construction which is often inevitable in chairs, sofas &c., and which tends to make a good design more difficult. Without any further notice of the many different tableforms and their manifold transformations, from the solid typical flamish oak table with its turned feet to the Rococo table with its multiplied ornaments and scrolls, we will conclude the present article with some observations on the seat furniture.

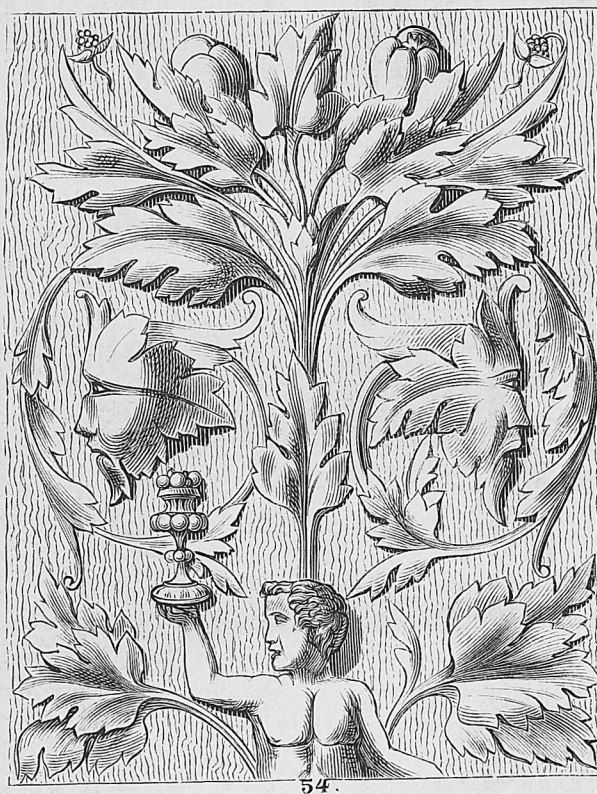
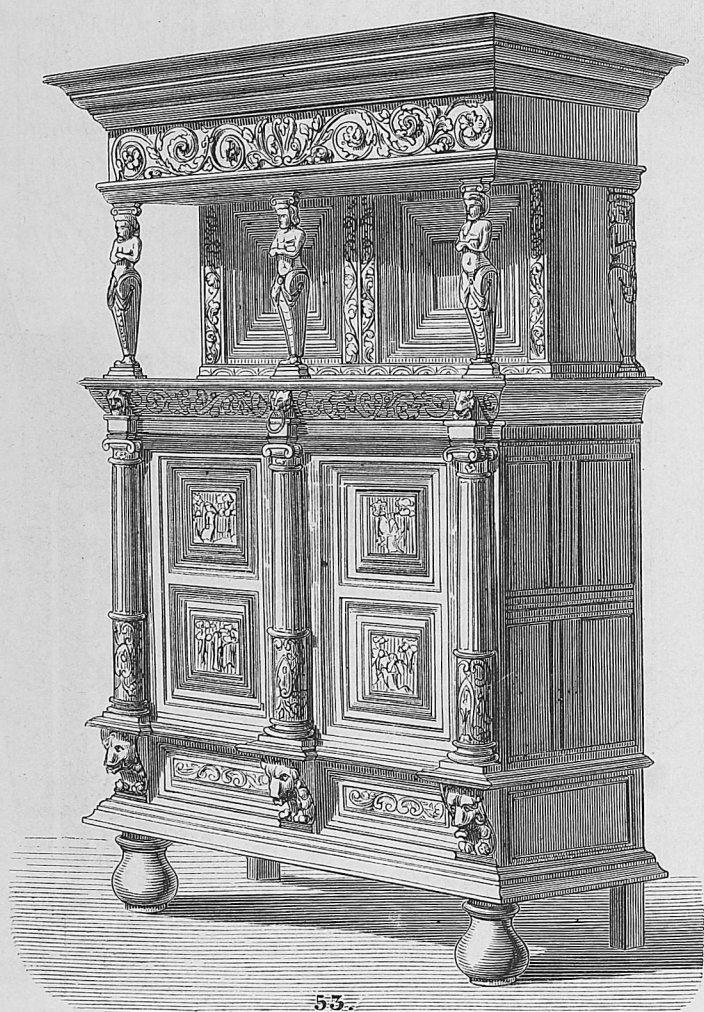
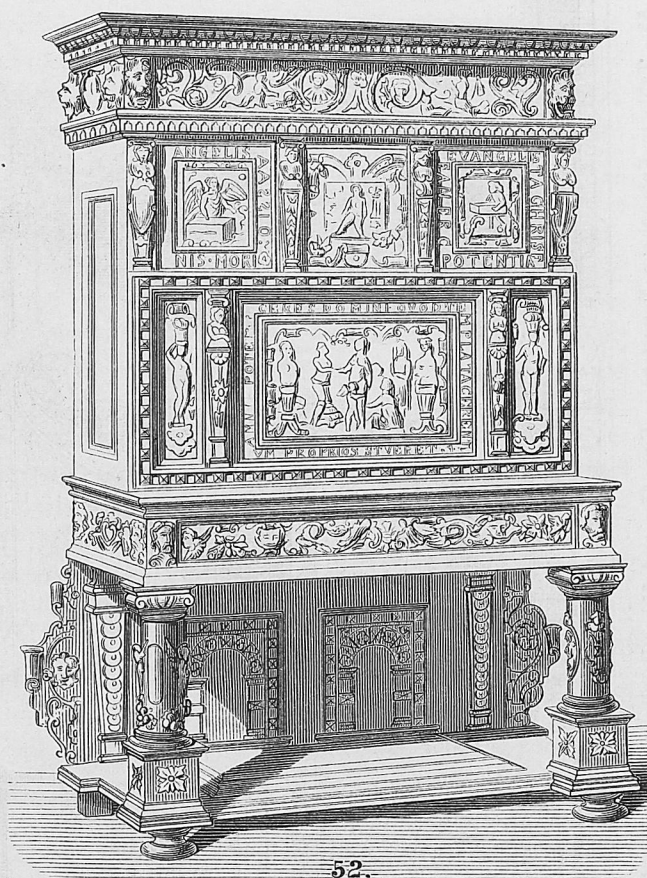
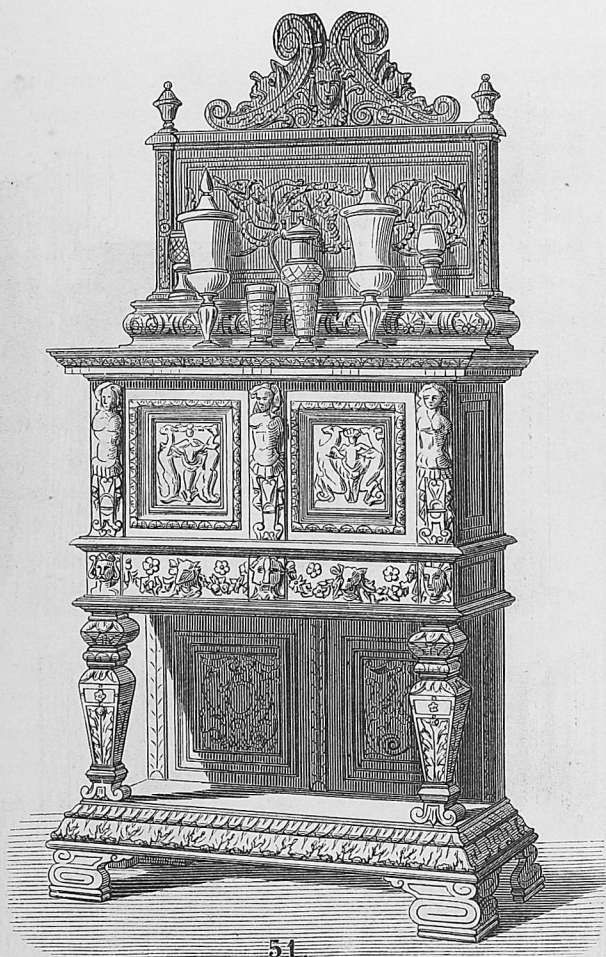
It is generally allowed that it is one of the most difficult tasks of the cabinetmaker to give a shape to these pieces of furniture which shall satisfy every demand; for it must not be forgotten that they can only be perfectly satisfactory if in the first place every requirement for comfort is taken into consideration, such as regard to the position of the body, easy movement, and facility for cleansing &c. &c. Hence the general form, the treatment of the surfaces and of the structural parts require together with great solidity of construction, the utmost possible avoidance of sharp edges and corners as well as of carved ornaments on the places which are not suitable for them, such as the backs &c. These

demands do not seem to have been as carefully attended to either in Gothic art or in the Renaissance, and it is from this point of view that these works must be judged.

Next, as to the sofas: these are an outgrowth from the Gothic bench and its back. In the middle ages this bench served for a chest or trunk, having under the seat drawers or other locked places. Moreover it was not stuffed, but only provided with loose cushions laid upon it, and for the back to lean against. The former construction was often retained by the Renaissance, or also the lower part of the sofa was made solid (Figs. 58 and 60) the second on the contrary was so modified that the loose cushions and draperies were soon exchanged for upholstery.

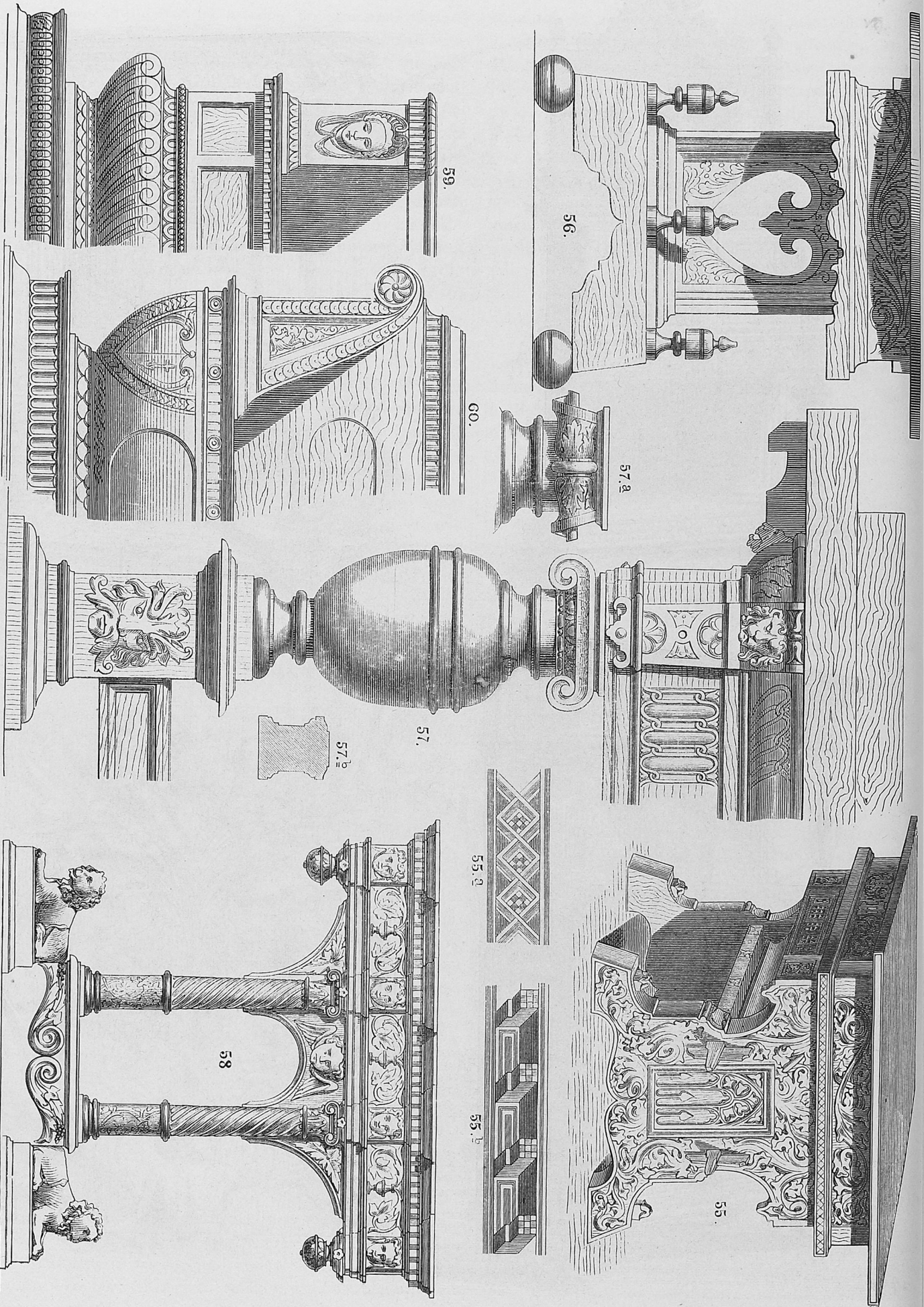
The case was the same with the chairs, as has been already illustrated by the specimen from Obernkirchen (Plate 1). Generally speaking, the use of chairs in the early middle ages was but rare, benches fastened to the walls being almost exclusively used, and the few examples of the older Gothic chairs which have come down to us are of such a kind that, both by their large and heavy dimensions and by their peculiar formation, they make it evident that they are only to be regarded as pieces for show or for seats of honour. The treatment of forms of these chairs was apparently to be attributed to that of the church stalls of the same period. Thus we plainly recognise in Fig. 61 the influence of the artistic shape of the not yet clearly developed Gothic stall; in Fig. 62 on the other hand, the peculiar style of the later Gothic, the principles of which should not be adopted without due consideration in ecclesiastical stalls, and in smaller pieces must be considered entirely out of place, as the frame work is heavy and uncomfortable, and at the same time somewhat dangerous on account of the numerous corners and edges and as the architectural treatment, especially the use of wooden pinnacles, finials, gablets &c., is by no means appropriate to the structure and purpose of the chair. If anywhere, it is here that the Renaissance has struck the more proper path, constructing the chairs in a much lighter fashion, banishing all those arbitrary additions that were borrowed from the stone architecture of the Gothic period and allowing the shape to develop itself organically from the requirements of the object itself; at the same time, through the much more general use of the chair, there appeared the various rudimentary shapes, as the armchair with high and richly carved back (see Fig. 63, straight in its lines and heavy in its dimensions), or, as in Figs. 66 and 66a, with slightly turned feet; or as stool without arms (Figs. 64 and 65 with rich carving and side pieces), or a highbacked chair with turned feet, stuffed and with a leather covering, with buttons and frieze (Figs. 67 and 67a) and many others.

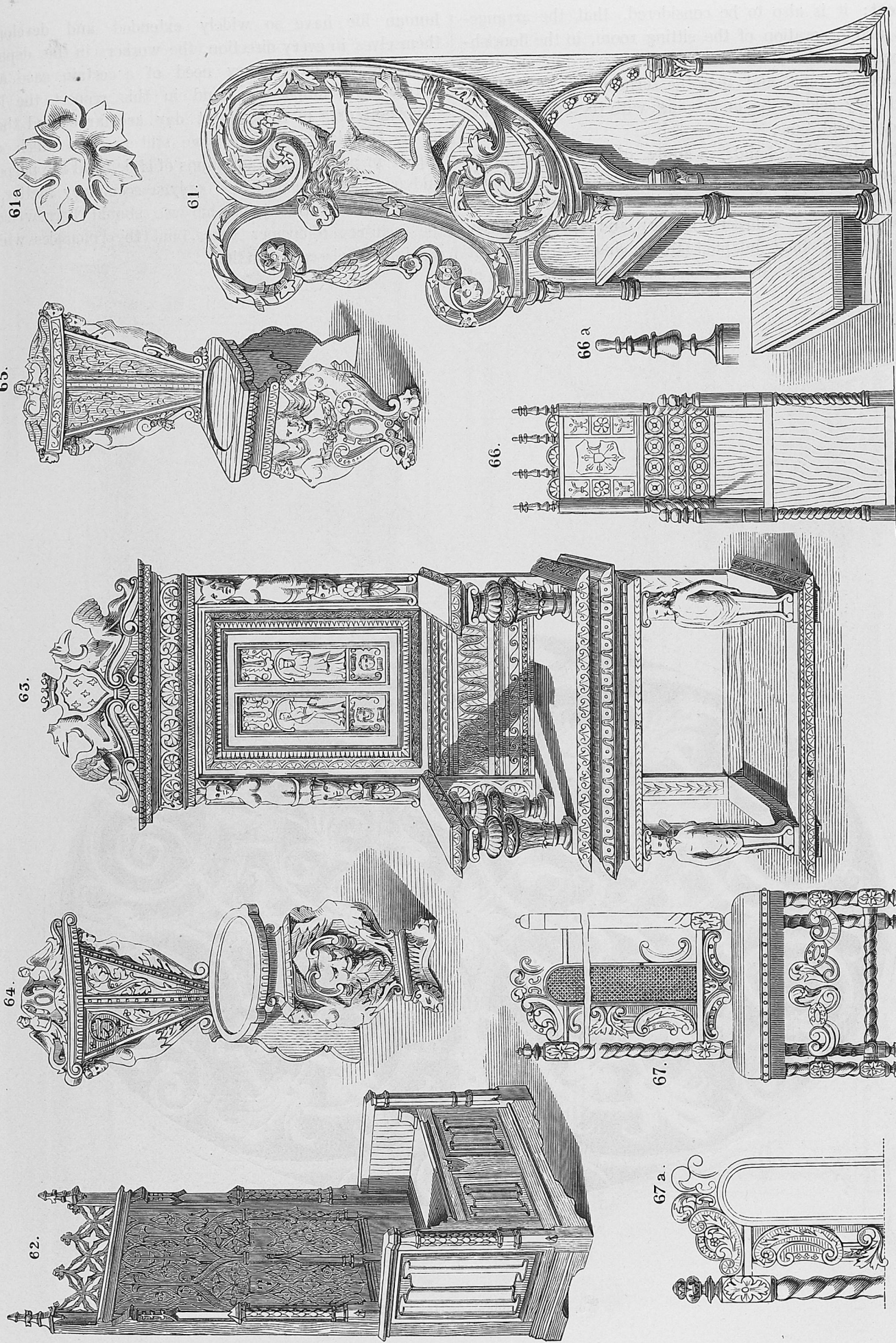
Above all it is the great variety of original forms which the seat furniture of the Renaissance presents as most worthy of consideration, not the more elegant treatment of them: nor are the types of the Renaissance furniture to be altogether regarded as finished works of art, but as capable of and partly requiring a further deve-



Figs. 51, 52 and 53. Renaissance Cabinets in the Austrian Museum in Vienna.  
Fig. 54. Carved Ornament from Door in Oudenaarde.







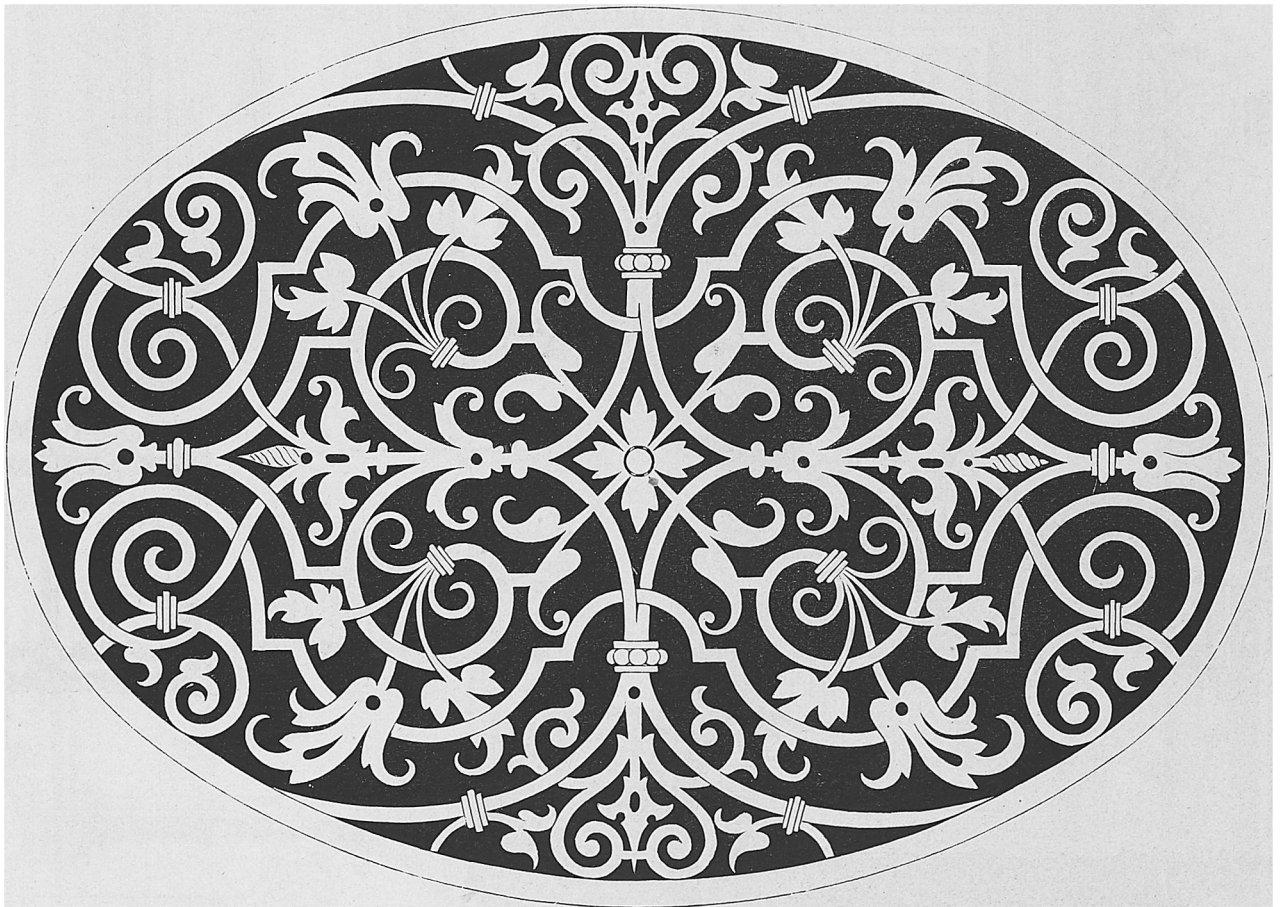
Figs. 61 and 61a. Thirteenth century Chair. Fig. 62. Gothic Chair, fifteenth century work. Figs. 63. 64 and 65. Renaissance Chair, sixteenth century work, Italian. Figs. 66 and 66a. Chair of Honour of an Abbes from the House of Clèves. Figs. 67 and 67a. Seventeenth century Chair in the Museum of Porte de Hal in Bruxelles.



lopment: it is also to be considered, that the arrangement and decoration of the sitting room, in the flourishing period of the Renaissance, were very different from those of our time, and that the furniture of those days would only seldom be in keeping with the appartements of the present time.

On the other hand, a study of the furniture of that period is of great importance for us, as it shows us what a great facility the artists of that time possessed in the creation of different shapes and how playfully and naturally they adapted these shapes to different purposes: for just in our time, when the necessities of

human life have so widely extended and developed themselves in every direction, the workers in this department of art have every need of a certain ease and freedom in composition, and in this respect the less important arts of the present day are far behind those of the Renaissance period; we still are too much occupied in general with questions of style, and the purpose and use of the furniture is only a secondary matter, it is not however the style, that we should borrow from the furniture of former times, but the principles which regulated their configuration.



No. 1. Ornament for Inlaid Work.